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ABSTRACT

Isolated from other professionals, teachers and their practice are embedded within a hierarchical system in which the day-to-day activities are governed by external forces: administrative mandates, parental request, and currently, legislative directives. One issue facing teachers today and about which their voices are infrequently heard is that of culture, and the growing diversity of the pupil population of the United States. This diversity stands in contrast to a notable lack of apparent diversity in the teaching force. This paper is about teacher study groups as activity settings where teachers might break free of that isolation and engage in powerful learning about culture and literacy. The paper reports on research conducted from 1995 through 1997 on two study group contexts for teacher learning--one focused on exploring culture, literacy, and autobiography through a master's course, and a subsequent voluntary book club called the Literary Circle, which continued for two years. The paper states that the study of the activity settings and participants' conversations in the course and the book club led to the theorizing about the meaning of "sustain" and "sustainable" when referring to teacher development in study groups. It first describes the research into the two study groups, as well as the underlying rationale for the thematic focus and value placed on conversations within the study group. It then shifts focus to a discussion of sustainability in light of the groups' described activities and subsequent initiatives. (Contains 27 references.) (NKA)

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Reading Lives: Creating and Sustaining Learning about Culture and Literacy Education in Teacher Study Groups

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Introduction
Researching the Study Groups
Learning within Contexts of Sustained Teacher Inquiry
Sustainability as a Feature of Conversation-Based Teacher Learning
Acknowledgements
References

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Introduction

The isolation within which contemporary teachers work is so common as to be almost transparent. Isolated from other professionals, teachers and their practice are embedded within a hierarchical system in which the day-to-day activities are governed to external forces: administrative mandates, parental request, and, currently, legislative directives. The teachers—the ones with the most knowledge about the specifics of the contexts in which they work—may feel the least empowered to engage in innovative practices that could enhance the lives of their students in important ways. This paper is about teacher study groups as activity settings where teachers might break free of that isolation and engage in powerful learning about culture and literacy.

While relatively new to teacher education, women's study groups are embedded in a relatively long tradition in the United States (Gere, 1997). Such groups arise at the margins of more public, official policies and practices and have their genesis in the realities of participants' day-to-day lives. They provide an opportunity to voice beliefs and concerns, exchange ideas with others, and engage in inquiry about means for enhancing their own lives and the lives of those with whom they work (whether students or family members). Study groups provide an activity setting in which these voices and views can be expressed as part of learning.

One issue facing teachers today and about which their voices are infrequently heard is that of culture, and the growing diversity of the pupil population of the United States. This diversity stands contrast to a notable lack of apparent diversity in the teaching force. For many reasons, which we discuss below,

CS 512 337

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current efforts of professional development featuring multicultural education in general, and specifically literacy as cultural practice, fall depressingly short. Some teacher education efforts may actually serve to reinforce the very stereotypes they seek to eliminate. A second issue relates to challenges from asking teachers to teach in ways they themselves have never experienced. Current methods grounded in "conversation-based learning" (e.g., literature circles and book clubs, collaborative learning, leading instructional conversations) are often not part of teachers' own learning experiences.

The topic of culture and the idea of studying it in the company of one's peers require a sustained professional development experience. It requires that participants can grow in trust, explore a complex idea by repeated passes through it from diverse perspectives, and weave in the exploration a variety of texts, including their own experiences and those of others. In this chapter, we describe a three-year line of research designed to address these two problems in teacher education and professional development. From 1995 through 1997, we researched two study group contexts for teacher learning. One focused on exploring culture, literacy, and autobiography through a master's course on culture, literacy and autobiography, and a subsequent voluntary book club called, The Literary Circle. This voluntary book club continued for two years, its conversations spanning twenty-four books selected by its members. As such, it offered a novel context within which to follow teacher learning about culture as well as literacy.

Our study of the activity settings and participants' conversations in the course and the book club led to our theorizing about the meaning of "sustain" and "sustainable" when referring to teacher development in study groups. Thus, in the chapter, we begin with a description of our research into the two study groups, as well as the underlying rationale for our thematic focus and value placed on conversation within the study group. We then shift our focus to a discussion of sustainability in light of the groups' described activities and subsequent initiatives.

Researching the Study Groups

The context of both the course and the Literary Circle stressed reading and discussion of ethnic autobiographical literature. In the first, the principal investigators, who are university-based teacher educators and researchers, largely directed this experience. However, with the subsequent formation of the Literary Circle, the participating teachers took more power and responsibility for learning within the group. As participant observers, we worked collaboratively with teachers in the course and Literary Circle to read and talk about literature and document the group's meetings.

We used ethnographic and sociolinguistic methods to study participants' learning as they read, wrote, and talked about compelling personal literature describing the cultural experience. We were interested in teacher learning both about culture and literacy instruction. The study addressed two challenges in contemporary

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American teacher education: (1) the disparity in background between a largely Euro-American teaching force and the diverse pupils it serves; and (2) the difficulty of teaching about literacy and culture in responsive, dialogic ways.

Why Culture? Why Conversation?

Literacy is deeply rooted in cultural experience, and our society presents teachers with a broad and rich diversity of youngsters whose cultural experience may differ considerably from their own. Yet, being members of the so-called "mainstream" and trained within a profession linguistically and socially homogeneous, many teachers find themselves culturally isolated. They lack awareness of the cultural foundations of literacy in their own lives as well as the lives of others. It is difficult for them to investigate complex issues of race, culture, social class, and language diversity. Their professional education typically does not foster in them a sense of culture as a dynamic process whereby people make meaning in contact with one another. By introducing and researching teacher-led book discussions of ethnic literature, we hoped to investigate alternative texts and contexts for teachers to learn about the cultural foundations of literacy in their own and others' lives.

Our study was also designed to investigate the role these alternative texts and contexts might play in improving teachers' learning about literacy instruction. This second goal stems from contemporary expectations that teachers will innovate to improve youngsters' literacy development by making instruction more responsive and dialogic. This typically involves changes in the following:

1. textual materials -- moving from commercially prepared short stories and text excerpts as a basis for instruction to using original literature

2. curriculum organization -- moving from isolated instruction in reading, writing, language, and subject matter to intra- and interdisciplinary teaching

3. roles and contexts -- the teacher moving from controlling topics and turns to assuming a supportive instructional role, while students take greater responsibility for topic selection, discussion, and assessing their own progress

Both the challenge to teach about culture and the challenge to teach responsively are rooted in the paradox of expecting teachers to teach in ways unlike the ways they were taught. Scholars criticize the form and content of professional education for encouraging teachers to foster learning that is dialogic in nature and aimed at framing and solving complex problems, yet rarely providing teachers

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opportunities to experience such teaching and learning for themselves. To respond to this challenge, we created and studied a dialogic, literature-based form of professional development. One of the teachers who participated in our study registered her interest in this possibility as follows:

> One of the most important (reasons for participating) for me was...as a teacher... because it gave me a feeling for what the kids are trying to do in the classroom. Whenever I participate in things my kids do, it gives me a lot more insight (into) what they're trying to do (Interview, July, 1996).

Details of the Study. Our study combined two prior lines of research. The first focuses on the use of narrative, specifically ethnic autobiography, as a resource for teacher learning about culture (Florio-Ruane with de Tar, in press). The second focuses on the pedagogical power of reading, writing, and talking about literature in peer-led book clubs to foster youngsters' comprehension and critical thinking (McMahon & Raphael, with Goatley & Pardo, 1997). We reasoned from these lines of work that teacher-led book club discussions might provide a strategic site in which to foster and investigate teachers' own professional development. We asked the following three research questions:

> 1. What is the nature of the teachers' oral and written participation in book club activities?
>
> 2. How does participation influence their understandings of literacy–its cultural foundations as well as the process of learning from literature?
>
> 3. How does their participation inform teacher thinking about literacy curriculum and instruction?

The study began in Fall 1995, with support from the National Council of Teachers of English Small Grants program, and continued through Summer 1997. The ten teacher participants in the first teacher study group—-the master's course—-were typical of both the student cohort at Michigan State University and the national teaching force in that they were Euro-American, female, monolingual speakers of English, and from lower- and middle-income backgrounds (Gay, 1993). The course instructor (Florio-Ruane) selected the initial six books; members of the Literary Circle selected the rest, with teachers assuming increasing control of book selection. As a text set (Calkins, 1991) that developed over time, the books explored identity and power at the group and the

individual level. Their authors recount what is lost and what is gained when, upon entering American schooling and public society, they are asked to acquire not only new skills and linguistic operations, but also new perspectives on the world and themselves within it.

The participant observers included the two principle investigators (Florio-Ruane and Raphael) and three research assistants (Mary McVee, Jocelyn Glazier, Susan Wallace-Cowell, and Bette Shellhorn). This team of researchers documented the activities that took place the master's course and subsequent club in five ways. First, the course instructor maintained an instructor's journal detailing both her weekly observations of the class and her ongoing questions, concerns and instructional decisions. Second, the researchers engaged as participant observers in the course and Literary Circle, writing field notes immediately after each meeting. Third, all book discussions were audiotaped, while two were also videotaped for analysis. Fourth, written texts produced by the teachers were collected and studied. Fifth, all teachers were interviewed about the book club experience in both the course and the Literary Circle.

Data collection and analysis used techniques drawn from ethnography and sociolinguistics including: (1) the gradual refinement of research questions and the inductive development of analytic categories grounded in continuous comparison of data as they were collected; (Glaser and Strauss, 1967); (2) triangulation among different kinds and sources of data to cross-check inferences about participants' understandings (Gordon, 1980); and (3) collaborative analysis of conversations, interviews and written texts for insights into the ways participants represented their ideas and negotiated them in social interaction with others (Denyer and Florio-Ruane, 1995).

Learning within Contexts of Sustained Teacher Inquiry

Our project was premised on the idea that learning begins and ends on the social plane (Harré, 1984). Approaching this work within a social historical lens, we developed a descriptive analysis highlighting changes in participants' ways of communicating with one another about the autobiographies, their own literate and cultural backgrounds, and their work as teachers. We took these changes in discursive practices as evidence of changes in participants' thinking about culture and also about reading and responding to literature (Gavelek & Raphael, 1996). Our findings about teachers' learning are described below within four broad categories: the role of a study group network, the role of narrative, the role of conversation, and teachers' intellectual identity development within a context of conversation and sustained inquiry.

The Role of a Study Group Network in Teachers' Learning

Teachers' responses to autobiographical literature in both the course and the Literacy Circle played a primary role in the research we conducted. Teachers often responded to the autobiographies by telling personal stories. Analyzing their personal narratives told in response to the published autobiographies helped us understand how participants viewed their own life experiences against those

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encountered in literature. This was a critical step to in the exploration of diversity and difference and it set a stage for one important contributor to sustainability — the personal connection as related to the participants' professional lives.

The study groups became the contexts in which these important ideas can continue to be explored and applied in participants' own teaching and their school community. Thus professional growth did not depend on the school faculty as the unit of experience, nor is the teacher viewed as a lone ranger changing her practice in isolation from colleagues. Moreover, the isolation of teachers in communities disparate in region, socioeconomic standing, language, ethnic characteristics and so forth is bridged by the participation of teachers from different schools and communities. Finally, electronic technologies such as the Internet and e-mail facilitate this crossing of borders supporting and sustaining conversation even when participants cannot be present face-to-face (Raphael, George, Florio-Ruane, Highfield, Kehus, & Hasty, 2000).

The Role of Narrative in Teachers' Learning

Recently, psychologists, anthropologists, and literary theorists have focused much attention on the power of narrative to define or redefine self and other. Yet even as the potential exists for narrative to be a powerful tool in exploring and transforming identity, stories are also limited, particularly when told within conversation (Tannen, 1989). While embedding personal narrative in conversation allowed participants to share views, it also constrained them. For example, narratives told by the Euro American, middle class women in our study were typically of equivalent length, consisted of a few key events tied to a general summary, and often connected thematically with one another. Their length, structure, and content functioned to sustain conversational involvement in the group.

However, participants reported in de-briefing interviews that these cooperative narrative patterns of discourse, while enjoyable, sometimes precluded their telling of longer, more complex personal narratives or ones they felt did not resonate with the emerging group theme (McVee, 1999). In this sense, the forms and function of the narratives inhibited exploration of issues of diversity or difference. An example from a master's course book club discussion serves to illustrate. It is drawn from participant observation research on the book club by Mary McVee (Glazier, McVee, Wallace-Cowell, Shellhorn, Florio-Ruane, and Raphael, 2000; Florio-Ruane with deTar, in press).

McVee grew up on a ranch in Montana, and she participated in a book club discussion of Jill Ker Conway's book, The Road from Coorain (1989), with teachers who had grown up in Michigan. Coorain is a sheep ranch in the Australian outback, and Conway's family is forced to leave the family ranch because of a severe drought. Coorain is a central metaphor in Conway's autobiography of her life in rural and urban Australia and her coming of age as a woman and scholar. The book club members talked about Coorain drawing on their own lived experiences. Several teachers in the group grew up on dairy farms

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in Michigan. Connections were readily made among participants across a myriad of agricultural context--from dairy farming to ranching to backyard gardening.

Several participants spoke to their experience growing up on farms. In the following example reported by McVee (in Glazier et al, 2000, p. 310), we see two participants exchange turns smoothly, each linking her turn topically with what has been previously said thus weaving a sense of shared understanding and inter-personal connection. Each has grown up in a farming context, and each sees that experience to be connected to her understanding of Conway's autobiography. Here they are talking about the farmer's consciousness of weather:

> Speaker One: Well, I know just the, what the nature and the weather thing.
>
> Speaker Two: Yeah, that affected me because being on a farm, where your dad is able to do and his farm hands in the course of the day has to do with the weather. You know and what you're gonna be able to accomplish in that day and, you know, it's all around the weather. The connection between nature.
>
> Speaker One: I find myself even now, you know, like being very conscious of how many sunny days we've had in a row.
>
> Speaker Two: Me too.
>
> Speaker One: And how many rainy days we've had in a row.
>
> Speaker Two: How are the farmers doing?

Note the high degree of involvement in the speakers' talk--completing one another's sentences, noting agreement, repeating one another's key words or themes. One way to view this example is that participants are forming a kind of connected knowing in which they are responding to Conway's text and to one another with narratives elaborating key themes in the book. This can be viewed as a framing and focusing on meaning that is essential to comprehension. However, it can also be viewed, as it was by McVee, as a "narrowing" of focus--a premature assumption of understanding on the part of speakers, such that they gloss over differences in context and meaning in the service of continuity and consensus.

Because their families did not have to grow their own food for the dairy cattle, these speakers did not share Conway's desperate experience of watching livestock starve to death because of drought. One of the graduate students

working as a participant observer in the course experienced this move as one that limited her own and others' opportunity to learn from the narratives by means of comparison and contrast. Mary McVee grew up on a ranch in Montana. Its isolation, expansiveness, and dependence on climate closely resembled Conway's description of Coorain. Like Conway, McVee lived through her family's near loss of its land because of drought. She viewed the prevailing interpretation as limiting the ways Conway's work might be understood and wanted the group to acknowledge that, in her words, "a ranch is not a dairy farm."

Although McVee wanted the group to struggle with the differences as a starting point for talking about their responses to Coorain and the drought as central metaphors in Conway's autobiography, she did not introduce this alternative into the conversation. Not wanting to disrupt the conversation's apparent coherence and participants' congeniality, McVee remained silent. She noted her frustration with the conversation later and in writing—first in her personal journal and later in a study of the conversation's dynamics—an analysis of "what went wrong" from her point of view in this discussion.

One can imagine other, similar problems with book club discussion—for example, readings of Conway's book might be undertaken by city-dwellers whose sole experience with agriculture was a small window garden. The point is not to assert one "correct" reading of the metaphor but to suggest that the narratives we read—and the narrative responses participants made to them—were not inherently instructive about difference and diversity. They could be strung together thematically to suggest connection and shared knowledge or they might be read in terms of their difference, thus shedding light on difference in participants' experiences, prior knowledge, or social position. Lack of awareness of these possibilities limits the educative potential of narratives.

This instructor's move—and students' response to it—illustrate and reinforce a general pattern in the conversations, especially in the course, where participants' lacked of familiarity with book clubs, the theme of culture, the genre of autobiography, and one another. Conversation was biased toward thematic, structural and social connection with others. This is a typical, preferred style of conversation documented by researchers who have studied the conversation and learning of middle class, Caucasian females in the US—very much the people who fill the ranks of the teaching profession in our country (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986; Edelsky in Tannen, 1993).

Absent other voices at the table, and even admitting of within group diversity (as is the case in McVee's example), the force of politeness and consensus is strong and may go unnoticed and unexamined. Thus, while potentially empowering at least for some of the speakers, study group conversation, and its embedded, connected, and uncontested narratives, can reinforce, even reify, an uncritical assumption of homogeneity and limit exploration of even modest differences in knowledge, perspective, or values. In short, while narrative played an important role in facilitating book club discussion, it also limited participants' exploration

of difference both among themselves and between themselves and the authors of the published autobiographies.

These findings raise important questions for further research about how narrative, particularly in multicultural classrooms and curriculum, can support or make manifest participants' learning about difference (McVee, 1999). They also point to the limits and the possibilities of conversation as an activity setting within which teachers can learn about culture and diversity.

The Role of Conversation in Teachers' Learning about "Hot Lava" Topics within Culture

Caucasian, female, monolingual, middle class females continue to dominate the elementary teaching force despite efforts to recruit a more diverse cohort. Our research enabled us to think about how to expand the cultural consciousness of so-called "White teachers" (Paley, 1979/89). Through their involvement in two years of book club conversations, we learned a great deal from our collaborating teachers about the conditions, which seem to support critical talk about culture and some of the difficult issues it encompasses (e.g. inequality based on race, language, ethnicity, and gender).

At the beginning of our project, what was particularly evident in participants' talk was a sense of "culturelessness." One teacher said in a de-briefing interview after a year of participation, "I was one of those people in the beginning who (thought) I had no culture. There's nothing to me. I've had no experiences." This comment resonates with work in the field of cultural studies, which asserts that members of the so-called "dominant culture" hold taken-for-granted assumptions of an amorphous monoculturalism (Frankenburg, 1993), and a stance of "color blindness"(Paley, 1979/89). This social positioning limits their reflection upon and discussion of race, racism, privilege, and Whiteness (MacIntyre, 1997).

Along with this stance comes an informal, unspoken "code of ethics" which denotes how the topic of race should be engaged in public spaces. As the novelist and literary critic Toni Morrison suggests, "in matters of race, silence and evasion have historically ruled" discourse (1992, p. 9). In analyzing conversations in the book club, particularly those about African-American authors and their texts, we found evidence of this silence. We also found evidence that, over time and by means of inter-textual experiences, participants gradually more willing to engage difficult topics like race as they became familiar with one another, book club as an activity, and diverse authors and texts.

This finding is illustrated by our analysis of conversations around two works by Maya Angelou, I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings (1969), read and discussed early in the master's course, and Gather Together in My Name (1973), read later, after the course ended and participants formed a voluntary book club. Jocelyn Glazier, a participant observer, chose to analyze talk in these two contexts because, unlike the smoothly linked exchanges in more typical conversations such as the discussion of The Road from Coorain, talk about Angelou's books

seemed to be more difficult to focus and sustain. She wondered why this might be the case and undertook extensive analysis of these two book club conversations. Among the many things that stand out in these books is their confronting of the reader with difficult, edgy topics--often in a folkloric style and always to provoke the expectations of a Euro American readers (Lionnet, 1989).

What is evident from Glazier's analysis of these two conversations, spaced approximately six months apart, is that difficult topics raised by Angelou are initially avoided in book club conversation. Of this Glazier writes that, "conversations about topics such as racism, sexual assault, and social class--all raised in Angelou's books--are among those difficult for these book club participants to sustain" (Glazier et al, 2000, p. 296). Glazier came to call topics such as these "hot lava."[1] Like the children's playground game, where the goal is to run a course yet avoid stepping on spots of "hot lava," book club participants initially tended to approach and then dart away from difficult topics in their conversational inter-play. However, despite their efforts, these topics did not go away.

The autobiographical literature we read (and the personae of its diverse authors) was a persistent reminder of these topics. And, in the case of some like Maya Angelou, the author was a ubiquitous figure in American popular as well as literary culture, whose voice continued to insinuate itself into the group. Participants had multiple "Maya sightings" on television, in books, on the radio, and in newspapers. These built a sense of kinship with Angelou, and they began to evoke her and some of the more difficult themes her book address. In addition, as the "hot lava" accumulated in the other books and authors read over the two years of the Literary Circle's life span. Participants revisited Angelou's writing seeking links to and differences from the writing of other African American female authors (e.g. Zora Neale Hurston, Toni Morrison, and Alice Walker; African American male authors (e.g. James McBride), as well as authors, both male and female, from other times, places, and ethnic groups (e.g. Amy Tan, Mike Rose, Jung Chang, Esmeralda Santiago, Frank McCourt, Mary Crow Dog, and Victor Villasenor).

This intertextual reading about hot lava themes such as racism and inequality increased fluency with ideas and trust among conversants. It shed light on within-group differences, inter-group similarities and differences, and the importance of both local and historical context. It led us beyond stereotyped readings of isolated books, seeking, instead the thematic connections among books and the way taking multiple passes at an idea could increase our understanding of that idea as well as our ability to sustain difficult talk about it. We were, for example, initially unable to articulate how, in Their Eyes Were Watching God, the oppression of African American men and women in the post-Reconstruction American south might have caused profound stress in their relationships with one another. It was far easier to critique individual characters' motives or temperament than to sense the ways in which these were socially, politically, and culturally situated.

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With the accumulation of talk and texts, however, the group began to draw comparisons and contrasts. It was easier for us to examine the historical, social, and political dimensions of oppression in distant societies and cultures such as China than in familiar ones like our own. Reading Wild Swans, for example, we were easily and deeply moved by the author's account of the damaging effects oppressive political systems had on the Chinese family. Using descriptions of more distant lives and places as touchstones, we re-read Hurston's work in a different way, tackling the more difficult task of considering (and re-considering) racism's impact on individual and family identity. Our research suggests that this willingness to risk did not, however, come easily or quickly. It took two years. Only with sufficient time to negotiate a shared identity as members of the book club did participants appear to break their silence and create for themselves a new "curriculum" for thinking and speaking about what, for Caucasian and middle class Americans, are historically difficult topics. This finding is important and speaks to the forms and functions of teacher professional development in the area of culture.

Professional development in the area of cultural diversity is an area that is notoriously challenging, both because it is difficult for teachers to talk about the aforementioned "hot lava" topics and because most in-service education is of short duration. Time limits both context and text such that teachers typically learn about "others" by studying the characteristics of ethnic groups in texts (both oral and written) where expert knowledge is presented to them. Lacking opportunities to explore culture as a complex and lived process in which also participate, and lacking time to garner cultural understanding in and through multiple and complex, multi-voiced texts, teachers tend to come away from such professional development reinforced in their extant beliefs and prejudices (McDiarmid and Price, 1990). What seems needed, instead, is not multicultural education as a set of techniques or discrete factual content, but as a process of critical engagement--with self, others, texts, and ideas (Chavez Chavez and O'Donnell, 1998).

Teachers' Intellectual Identity in the Study Group Experience

Our research on the study group examined participants' views of their own learning and professional growth, drawing primarily on analysis of interview data and personal writing done by the teachers as part of course and club participation. The teachers reported learning about aspects of identity including professional practice, personal intellectual growth, and participation in literacy as culturally grounded practice. While we had hypothesized that they would learn about literacy and culture, a key unanticipated finding was that teachers reported discovering themselves as "thinkers" as a by-product of their involvement in book discussions.

Repeatedly, teachers talked of the impact that their participation had on their sense of their professional agency. Specific references were made to creating book club groups within their school settings; present their curriculum work locally to colleagues within their school or district as well as at state and national

conferences; and continuing to enhance in their own intellectual lives by reading multicultural literature. Analyzing the teachers' writing and interviews, we gained insight into this sense of agency. We identified four clear themes: (1) increased confidence in and expression of their ideas; (2) a new tendency to envision alternative "possible selves" as they thought about their futures as teachers and as citizens; (3) increased desire to pursue learning; and (4) a renewed passion for literature and its ideas. The opportunity to read challenging literature, talk about it with colleagues, and craft (and hear) one another's personal narratives enhanced teachers' sense of themselves not only as teachers, but as thoughtful participants in society.

Sustainability as a Feature of Conversation-Based Teacher Learning

We find a link to the sustainability of the study group as well as its personal, intimate quality here, as their identity as professionals who have agency increased and as their critical analysis of the current curriculum became more sophisticated. There was an energy in their work lives traceable to their desire to apply what they had learned about themselves in their own teaching. The continued interactions around curriculum they wanted to enact may have provided some of the impetus to continue to stay together This finding also illustrates some ideas about "how to sustain a group."

In sustainable groups, the goals may shift. As early efforts toward one goal come to fruition, doors open to new goals that can serve to keep a group, even in light of inevitable comings and goings of some of its members. In short, while the participants move in and out of involvement, the evolving practices and knowledge of the group continues to be invoked, in the case of our study group, over twenty-four months, as many book clubs, and twenty-four books about culture, education, and identity.

One of the benefits of this kind of sustainable growth is that, when studying the idea of "culture," it is possible for difference to be identified and for conversations in, through, and about difference to unfold. Especially in a profession that remains primarily Caucasian, English-speaking, female, and middle income, it is far too easy (1) rationalize the sources of difference between teachers and pupils; (2) treat culture as something "others" have and we do not; (3) treat Euro American experience as "normal" or unmarked and other ethnic experiences as "abnormal" or marked; and (4) assume a homogeneity in the teaching force that ignores important experiences of difference among ourselves and thus makes it hard to see how our own cultural practices and positions are socially and historically determined.

Over time in the Literacy Circle participants identified and elaborated differences in their own coming of age as participants in culture and, by extension, their experience of schooling and the process of becoming literate. It became easier and more interesting for participants to craft their own "literacy narratives" (Soliday, 1994). In these stories, the teller captures aspects of coming of age within a particular community, tradition, and family by describing the

kinds of texts and literacy events encountered or created there. One teacher, Kate, developed a project for herself (extended ultimately to her development of a curriculum project for youngsters) in which she culled "artifacts" of her own coming of age as a woman, a Catholic, and the daughter of farmers. She brought to this documentary work a close analysis of personal books, photographs, and writings. It is significant that literacy played a prominent role in Kate's project, in the book we read, in the stories many of us told, and in the study group's practice. In many ways we embodied in the study group the idea that literacy is itself a cultural practice and that each learner brings personal literacy narratives to the table as we talk about literacy education.

The aim of the study group was not "sustainability," but its evolving practices and problems occasioned its having the kind of duration and focus that it ultimately had. This was an experience that was not paid for by large research grants, was not convened and determined by professors, did not compensate members in money or status, did not take place during "work time" or within the walls of members' workplaces, and was not about the day-to-day concerns of classroom teachers. Why, then, did members come so faithfully to participate in discussions of literature and link that participation to their growth as thinkers, citizens, and educators?

Thinking about Our Learning: Extensions into Practice

If we accept a model of socio-cognitive development in which learning occurs and is evidenced by engagement with others (who are alternately peers and more experienced others), we can look for evidence in our study of learning not only on the part of teachers, but also among the project's teacher educator/researchers. We identified the following five domains of learning-oriented change occasioned by our collaboration: (1) defining the book club situation; (2) shaping the thematic content of book club talk and text; (3) defining culture in more complex ways; (4) transforming ways of talking and ways of reading; and (5) reaching out to professional communities and classrooms. Each will be touched on briefly below.

When we stepped back from the study group to reflect on its life history, we found increased leadership among the teachers over time and a shift in teacher educator/researchers' participation from project leader/initiators, to fellow club members. As the circle of leadership widened, changes occurred in decision-making about what to read, why to read, and how to read.

The multiple voices within the group discursively crafted an emergent, open-ended "syllabus" reaching far beyond the one with which the course had begun. It took the form of an expanding network of linked texts (both oral and written) which were read differently (primarily by citing and referring to texts in different ways over time—moving from the explicitly personal or critical/descriptive to a hybrid of these two ways of reading). We found that learning in the study group spanned exploring the complexity of culture, confronting difficult topics (especially race and racism), learning to construe reading as a dialogic process of

making meaning in response to text and within interpretive communities, and culture as intimately tied to education for literacy.

Out of this learning, we gradually widened the circle to make extensions into practice that took a variety of forms and, in fact, continue presently, with some of the same participants plus newer members. Extensions include curriculum development for pupils and creating annotated bibliographies of children's and adults' autobiographical literature. They include creating new teacher support networks, as well as public presentations about the group by members of the current and the new networks to describe what is being learned within it. They include members tracking and documenting their own learning within this experience—both to enhance their understanding of what has been happening to them and to learn how this experience might be shared with other teachers and with pupils in productive ways. These sorts of learning experiences tend not readily to be available to teachers in their ordinary work and/or staff development; yet they resemble the higher order learning experiences teachers are expected to cultivate in youngsters.

Extensions from the study groups into practice have led to the development of a network of teacher researchers working in our state across diverse communities and school settings to continue the conversation about culture, literacy, and autobiography. This network is an example of the evolution of a study group so that it can encompass new members and grow with the ideas their participation brings. Further, we have taken our learning—both in form and in content—into our classrooms, trying to seed the curriculum and instructional environment with opportunities for youngsters to participate in similarly sustainable and peer-led explorations of culture and its textual representations.

The experience of the network leaves us with new questions to explore are questions that we are continuing to explore together as a form of conversation-based teacher development. We are investigating, for example, the ways that teachers who have had a chance to participate in such an experience might approach literacy instruction differently from colleagues who have not had this experience. We are researching the development of curricula for youngsters that make room for this kind of sustained and dialogic study of text within an array of potentially competing demands and models for instruction proffered in the name of reform.

We are currently studying together what we think makes a good teacher of literacy treating our network as a platform to look critically at national standards to which policy-makers believe teachers of literacy should be held. In this way we are continuing our own professional conversation and, in so doing, also trying to engage a wider conversation about teaching and teachers.

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The Teachers Learning Collaborative (TLC) is a network of teachers that began with the Literary Circle described in this chapter. As the group expanded, it

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1 We are grateful to Christopher Clark for introducing us to this metaphor. (back to text)

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